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Leza L Olson 08/28/2006 01:34:32 PM From DB/Inbox: Leza L Olson

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 003390

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/24/2016  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#) [IS](#)  
SUBJECT: IS ISRAEL CONSIDERING NEGOTIATIONS WITH SYRIA?

REF: TEL AVIV 3370

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones; Reasons 1.4 (B and D).

11. (C) Summary and comment: Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni's decision to name a mid-level MFA official to study options for breaking the Syrian-Iranian link have fueled press speculation on the possibility of renewed Syrian-Israeli negotiations. The story received a boost when Internal Security Minister Avi Dichter and Defense Minister Amir Peretz made public statements that were interpreted as supportive of talks with Damascus. PM Ehud Olmert, Vice PM Shimon Peres, and Livni immediately denied the reports. Livni's staffers maintained that their minister's intent had been to examine ways to loosen ties between Damascus and Tehran in light of Hizballah's attack on July 12, not to suggest that Israel and Syria should negotiate at the present time. The debate on Syria should be seen in the context of internal Israeli soul-searching following the Lebanon war and the desire to find some way to further isolate Iran, whose nuclear ambitions are seen by the GOI as the real threat. End comment.

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Dichter and Dayan's Damascus Debate  
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12. (U) Talk of a "Syria option" surfaced on August 20 when the press reported Livni's appointment of her former chief of staff, Jakub "Yaki" Dayan, as a "special project manager for possible negotiations with Syria." Dayan's work on the project came to light after he met with Professor Itamar Rabinovich, who headed the GOI's negotiating team with Syria under PM Yitzak Rabin in the mid-1990s.

13. (C) Press speculation reached a frenzy after Internal Security Minister Avi Dichter told Army Radio on August 21 that negotiations with Syria are preferable to war and are therefore "legitimate." Mentioning Sinai and alluding to the

Golan Heights, Dichter noted that Israel had returned territory captured in war on previous occasions in exchange for peace. He added that "if there is someone to talk to on the other side, we should talk. Israel can initiate this or turn to a third party." These views were reinforced by statements from some members of the Labor Party, including Defense Minister Amir Peretz. On August 21, Peretz suggested to CoDel Specter that Israel and the international community should consider whether negotiations with Damascus could possibly sever it from the Iran-Syria-Hizballah axis. He later echoed these points in discussions with the press.

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Olmert, Livni and Others Deny Plans to Negotiate  
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¶4. (C) Olmert lost no time in denying that the GOI would negotiate with Syria at the present time. In a discussion with the Ambassador and Senator Specter on August 20, Olmert discounted the prospect for talks with Syria, recalling that even previous GOI contacts with Hafez Assad -- whom he described as both smarter and more balanced than his "immature" son Bashar -- had failed. Publicly, Olmert went even further, calling Syria "the single most aggressive member of the axis of evil." He added, "when Syria stops supporting terrorism, when it stops giving missiles to terror organizations, then we will be happy to negotiate with them." Livni stressed that the Israeli position on Syria had not changed, and Vice PM Peres said that the time was not right for talks with Damascus.

¶5. (C) Livni's staff vehemently denied that Dayan's assignment in any way signaled an intent to negotiate with Syria, calling press speculation "a real red herring." They explained that Livni began looking for ways to loosen ties between Damascus and Tehran shortly after Hizballah attacked Israeli troops on July 12. She asked Nimrod Barkan, the deputy director general for political research (roughly equivalent to the head of INR in the Department) and his staff to formulate options and present them in late July. An MFA staffer who attended that meeting said that Livni was dissatisfied with the results, and decided to name an "independent" official -- Yaki Dayan -- to oversee a more far-reaching study.

¶6. (C) Livni's staff described Dayan as a logical choice, because he is well known to the minister and has expertise dealing with numerous Arab governments as a special envoy under the previous government. Dayan was conveniently available, having been released from his chief of staff duties by Livni following the last election and having failed to obtain enough high-level backing to stretch into the ambassadorial job in Athens, a move blocked by the MFA's union. One A/S-level official noted to the Ambassador that if Livni had considered negotiations as a serious option, then she never would have chosen a mid-level official to lead the project.

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Comment: Iran Remains the Key Focus  
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¶7. (C) Comment: Israelis are currently involved in an internal debate about possible mismanagement in the Lebanon war and the failure to significantly weaken Hizballah (reftel). As Israeli leaders look at the war, many of them blame Iran and Syria for the unexpected strength and resiliency of the Hizballah attacks. The more strategic-minded ministers are looking for options to weaken Hizballah and -- more importantly -- to further isolate Iran as it continues its pursuit of nuclear weapons. It is in this context that Dichter and others have raised the question of possible negotiations with Syria. At present, with Damascus relatively isolated due to its support for terrorism and implication in the Hariri assassination, Olmert and Livni have said they see no reason to change the GOI's previous position. They appear to believe that Israel has little to gain from helping Assad climb out of the hole his policies have dug for the Syrian regime.

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